



### Remembering Lou Sullivan: Celebrating 20 Years of FTM Voices

#### I REMEMBER LOU SULLIVAN

By Eldon E. Murray (1930-2007)

I am one of the founders of Gay Peoples Union in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After one of our weekly meetings in the early 1970s a thin young woman wearing black levis and a leather jacket approached me. "I'm Sheila Sullivan," she said. "I need to talk to someone and I think you are that person." I invited her to join me at my nearby apartment for coffee, expecting her to want to discuss her lesbian feelings.

I was surprised, but not shocked, when she confided that she had never discussed her feelings with anyone before, but that she felt that she was a man trapped in a woman's body. Her fondest memory was asking for and getting a cowboy suit for Christmas when she was seven years old. She further confided that she felt that she was not only a man, but a gay man. After exploring her feelings and fantasies further I came to understand that this profile fitted her personality completely.

Sheila worked as a secretary for the Slavic Languages Department of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. She could type with accuracy about 120 words a minute and could even type copy in Russian characters,

although she did not understand the language. She had begun to cross dress, wearing a man's white shirt and tie to work and the European woman who headed the department, approved because she thought it was "chic."

I urged her to read everything she could find about transsexuality, including psychiatric and medical journals meant for professionals. I also urged her to find a competent psychiatrist to work with. She volunteered to help me with typesetting and layout for our monthly magazine, GPU News. We got together several times a week to do the typesetting and layout for the publication and a very close friendship ensued as we discussed her research and her work with her new psychiatrist. She was gradually getting a better understanding of herself and I was getting a real education about transsexuality.

She gradually pushed the envelope on the cross dressing, starting to wear men's underwear, then men's slacks and finally men's shoes. We managed to keep a sense of humor as we worked to help her find her real personality. Slowly this thin young woman began to take on the characteristics of her inner personality. I remember how we laughed when her barber innocently asked whether she was a boy or a girl because she insisted on a man's hairstyle. Her response was curt and to the point. "None of your business. Shut up and cut my hair."

But it was not all laughs, for although her masculine side was coming forward, she still had some of her feminine side left. For all practical purposes she looked at this stage like a feminine gay boy. One Saturday morning I heard loud pounding on my back door and when I opened the door Sheila pushed inside sobbing hysterically. She explained that a group of young neighborhood toughs had threatened her while she was doing her laundry at a nearby Laundromat. They were going to beat up on the "faggot." She outran them, leaving her laundry behind and rushed to my door for help. I held her close and assured her that the incident was over and that she had done the right thing to run from them. About an hour later when she had recovered her composure I went with her to the Laundromat and her laundry was all still there.

When it became apparent that she really needed to leave Milwaukee to find a place that was more understanding and to begin to take hormones in preparation for the surgical transformation, she decided to go to San Francisco. Her parents, brother and sister were very supportive. Her going away present was a handsome man's suit and grand-



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father's pocket watch, a family heirloom. Even in San Francisco she had some difficulty finding a shrink who understood that she saw herself as a man, moreover a gay man, but she found one and began the hormone treatments. We kept in touch by mail and phone and she visited her parents every few months. She adopted the name of Lou and was able to grow a full beard. Her facial features and skin coarsened somewhat, but no one now questioned her gender. Lou had no trouble in finding employment getting a fine job with a major sporting goods firm where management knew her situation and was not bothered by it at all.

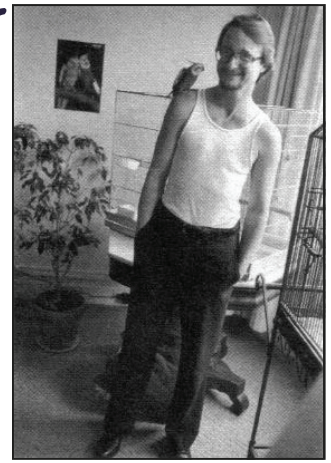
After the surgical transformation, Lou came down with AIDS and started his own typesetting business so that he could work when he felt at his best. His sister, now living in San Francisco was of great help and was there for him throughout his illness. He called me and said he was making one more trip back to Milwaukee just to see me. His family had visited him there recently so the trip was not really to see them. We spent an entire day together and when he left we both knew that we would never see one another again. A couple of weeks after his return to San Francisco his sister called to tell me that he had passed away quietly. Yes, I remember Lou Sullivan and think of him often. He was one of my most cherished friends. ▼

# REMEMBERING LOU

Born Sheila Sullivan in Milwaukee in 1951, Lou Sullivan died from AIDS complications in San Francisco in 1991. Among many accomplishments during his short life, Sullivan founded FTM and its newsletter, published the biography *From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland* (Boston: Alyson, 1990) and booklet *Information for the Female-to-Male Crossdresser and Transsexual* (3d ed. Seattle: Ingersoll Gender Center, 1991), and got contemporary “gender professionals” to recognize and acknowledge the existence of gay FTMs. Part of a comprehensive biographical work on Louis Graydon Sullivan, this presentation highlights Sullivan’s intersections with contemporary social movements and articulations of identity, including: Sullivan’s unique challenges to 1970s feminist consciousness, a comparison between the gay liberation movement in Milwaukee and the beginnings of a transsexual community in San Francisco, the struggle for agency between transsexual individuals and university-based gender programs, Sullivan’s transition from female transvestite to gay man, and how Sullivan was able to negotiate being a gay FTM with AIDS in the 1980s. Following in Sullivan’s footsteps, this presentation recognizes the importance of sharing portraits of transpeople in the past to fostering our sense of historical identity, especially our movement’s foretransmen.

*Bri Smith, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, PhD candidate in History, Modern Studies concentration: I “met” Lou in the same place where he “met” his first FTMs: the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Golda Meier Library. Lou’s life and work immediately had a profound impact on me. The more I learned*

*about Lou, the more I wanted to know. The more I come to know about Lou, the more honored I feel to be working on this project. It is truly a privilege to be the biographer of such a phenomenal individual, and to see his life and work live on.*



*Unlike Lou – who was an independent, self-taught scholar – I sought the institutional support and training of UWM’s History Department, where I am working on my PhD. My dissertation is titled “Yours in Liberation’: The Life and Work of Lou Sullivan.” Please email me at [SMITHB@UWM.EDU](mailto:SMITHB@UWM.EDU) with recollections, questions, and/or comments. ▼*

**Editor’s Note:** In this issue you will find many different accounts of the life of Lou Sullivan reprinted from the spring 2005 FTM newsletter. As well as small remembrances interspersed throughout this issue written by the many people who knew him, or were touched in some way that changed their lives. Included are some recollections of long ago and far away gender identities of the man people knew as Lou. Some may be taken aback by the use of Lou’s given name; however, it is a testament to the man who never forgot his past, or tried to cover it up with a story. ▼

Thank you!

*Martin Rawlings-Fein*  
[www.ftmsf.org](http://www.ftmsf.org)

## I Remember Lou...

Lou Sullivan was born in a female body June 15, 1951 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. From an early age he struggled with the clash between his female body and his sense of himself as a gay man. In the early 1970s he produced a newsletter for the Milwaukee gay scene and wrote for a number of gay and feminist publications. He moved to San Francisco with his boyfriend in the mid-70s. He began his hormonal transition to a male body in 1978, and his relationship ended when he decided to seek chest reconstruction, which he had in 1980. Motivated by his awareness of the difficulty of finding reliable information about FTM transition, he produced his first informational booklet on FTMs for the Janus Information Facility where he served as a volunteer. Because of his sexual orientation as a gay man he was refused genital reconstruction three times, but eventually he

was able to find a surgeon who would work with him and he had his genitals rendered to a masculine configuration in April 1986. He suffered many complications from that surgery, and he never really recovered. He was diagnosed with HIV in late 1986. Prejudice against the disease cost him his job, and he decided to devote the remainder of his life to developing social support for FTM transsexuals and crossdressers, and to educating health care professionals about the process and dynamics of female-to-male transition.

In the spring of 1987 he began a small FTM peer support group in San Francisco, and began publishing The FTM Newsletter in September of that year. After a ragged start, meetings and newsletter issues became quarterly events.

Lou set the stage for the later development of the educational organization FTM International, and for the development of an international FTM community that does not condone judging people by their sexual orientation. He was concerned about history, and was a founding member

*(Continued on page 3)*



# Lou Sullivan in His Own Words...

Selected and edited  
by Susan Stryker

*Lou Sullivan (1951–1991) was a female-to-male transsexual gay man. His diaries, journals, and personal correspondence — begun at age 11 and continued until shortly before his death — offer an unprecedented revelation of the processes through which a transsexual identity takes shape. The following selections are all from the period before Sullivan began actively pursuing sex reassignment.*

“When we got home, we played boys.”

—January 6, 1963; age 11

second entry in his first diary, received as a Christmas present

“I look in the mirror and say to myself, ‘That’s you, Sheila. That girl over there is you.’ It seems so funny.”

—April 18, 1965; age 14

“I wish I were a boy. They have a *real* feeling of being some one. They can walk down a dark street like they were its king. They don’t have to report or be sheltered. They have freedom and know what life really is. I want to, too. I don’t want to be a girl. I hate it. I don’t want it. Oh, sure, it makes me feel good when a boy looks at me and smiles. Or whistles. Sure. But that’s just because they like the way I look, not because they like *me*. I want *that*.”

—June 23, 1965; age 14

“My problem is that I can’t accept life for what it is . . . like it’s presented to me. I feel that there is something deep and wonderful underneath it that no one has found.”

—December 12, 1965; age 14

“No one looks deeper than the flesh.”

—February 22, 1966; age 14

“I want to look like what I am but don’t know what some one like me looks like. I mean, when people



look at me I want them to think— there’s one of those people . . . that has their own interpretation of happiness. That’s what I am.”

—June 6, 1966; age 15

“I thought of the days when I really thought I was a cowboy. I dressed the part and really was one. I don’t have to dress up any more and I’m glad. The cowboy’s in my soul, where he counts. He doesn’t have a name because he’s a thousand different men. Always men though. I really should have been a boy. I’d’ve been so much happier as a boy. I’ll probably make a good marriage ‘cause my husband’ll be me in all I want for myself. I’ll treat him as though he were me. Strange.”

—March 10, 1967; age 16

“My heart and soul is with the drag queens. This last week or so I’ve wanted to go and leave everything and join that world. But where do I fit in? I feel so deprived and sad and lost. What can become of a girl whose real desire and passion is with male homosexuals? *That I want to be one?* I still yearn for that world, that world I know nothing about, a serious, threatening, sad, ferocious, stormy, lost world.”

—November 22, 1970; age 19

“I realize so much how my adoption of masculinity is to mask my vulnerable feelings. My masculinity is the only escape and shield I have from my feelings of feminine helplessness.”

—September 11, 1973; age 22

“I feel like I’m freaking out in some internal, hidden-from-view way. I’m losing touch with the world.”

—October 14, 1973; age 22

“I know I can get exactly what I want now — to fantasize is no longer enough. Before it was beyond my dreams. It was the worst perversion that I wished I had a penis, to fuck a boy, to be on top and inside! But now it’s only a matter of time.”

—December 11, 1973; age 22

*This article appeared as a sidebar to the article, “Transgender History at the GLHS,” and was provided by the GLBT Historical Society. We thank them very much for their generosity, and hope to return the favor someday. ▼*



(Continued from page 2)

of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California. He was a prolific letter writer who took the time to pay attention to each and every person he made contact with who sought information about, crossdressing, passing, or sex reassignment surgery. He was concerned that transsexual people remain aware that not everyone reaches the same life decisions in the same way or at the same moment, nor do the same issues or concerns motivate them all. He was instrumental in raising the level of discussion within professional circles concerning the separation of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as the existence of FTM crossdressers and gay-identified FTMs. He wrote two books: “Information for the FTM Cross Dresser and Transsexual” (which he self-published in two editions in the 1980s, and the 3rd edition was published in 1990 by the Ingersoll Gender Center in Seattle, which now owns the

copyright) and “From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland” published in 1990 by Alyson Publications, Boston.

Lou died March 2, 1991 at the age of 39. He was not widely known. The phenomenal growth of transgender awareness and the synergy between the GLB and T communities had not been fully explored. No conscious effort had yet been made to serve transgendered or transsexual people with AIDS. Lou Sullivan left behind a mailing list of about 230 names, a roll of stamps, the model of inclusion in his support group, and the ethic of service to a community he hoped would someday exist. Now it almost does. In life and since his death he has been an inspiration for many transmen, both gay and straight.

**Jamison Green** — *From the book Transgender and HIV: Risks, Prevention, and Care by Walter Bockting, Ph.D., and Sheila Kirk, M.D., published in 2001 by The Haworth Press. ▼*

# Remembrances

It was an honor to have known Lou Sullivan, a true FTM pioneer. We met in 1989 in his newly formed San Francisco FTM support group. When we first spoke on the phone, his voice, soft but decidedly male, gave me goose bumps. Lou put me at ease with his boyish grin and infectious laugh, introducing me to the mainly transsexual group as a serious cross-dresser exploring my gender identity. He told me to "always be who I am" and I followed his advice as far as hormones and therapy. We spent many wonderful hours at his kitchen table, talking into the night about life, gender and sharing his hilarious bawdy sexual adventures as a gay man. I almost wished I was transsexual, Lou made being trans so much fun. FTMs from across the U.S. and other countries made the pilgrimage to San Francisco just to meet him. I treasure the original short newsletters Lou Xeroxed and his first "how to" book for FTMs. I still feel his spirit, with his courage and humor, guiding us today.

**Francis Vavra, Oakland, CA**

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Lou Sullivan was the first FTM transsexual man I ever met. The year was 1988, and I was exploring the idea of medical transition with fear, excitement and a startled yet steadfast focus. I'd seen Lou's small ad in the back pages of the lesbian sex magazine, "On Our Backs" advertising a book for "female-to-male cross-dressers and transsexuals", and a group that met quarterly with meetings and a newsletter – the group that was FTMI in its earliest incarnation. Before the "International" was added and the acronym "FTM" became a kind of hip cultural currency in the queer community of San Francisco and beyond. These were the early years, and Lou was the founder and driving, energetic man behind the scenes and in front of the group. He had started it at least two years earlier and now, FTM was rising to the surface in the pages of a dyke magazine. I was astonished and mesmerized.

It would take me at least a year to write for the information that the tiny ad promised, but when I did I was not disappointed. What was even better was that Lou wrote me back a note, and invited me to go to the quarterly FTM meetings. I would eventually look him up in the phonebook and call – out of nowhere, on a rainy afternoon when the two friends that I had confided in about my gender dysphoria were telling me our friendship would be terminated if I decided to become a man. He was friendly, supportive and very candid, "You should go to a meeting but before you go and are in a whole room full of FTMS; you can meet me." I did. I was astonished. Lou looked to my eyes to have been born male. He was around 5'7" and slender, he had longish medium brown hair sweeping across his forehead and a tank top on revealing muscular "Popeye" arms. "The hormones really work," he would tell me from across the kitchen table then – sage-like and serious at the same time. His words had a gravity that was necessary, even in their optimism. He wanted me and others to know it was possible; you can do this, transform your body and life to that of a man... He also felt that transition was one of the biggest decisions anyone could make, and not to be taken lightly. That night, after dinner and a drink at a local bar where he ordered rum and coke and watched wrestling (telling me then that he was gay) – I knew, that I would embark on that journey.

Later, Lou would become a friend. I'd go to FTM Support meetings and I'd visit his home. When he became ill with AIDS I lobbied through the Mission to Walgreen's to get him bubble bath, "get the one with the girl on the box, I don't care." It was also Lou's informed opinion on the legions of men who don't take bub-

ble baths – thinking them "unmanly" –that "those guys don't know what they're missing."

Lou was down-to-earth and completely unpretentious. He had a sense of humor, a Midwesterner's common sense, and was a tireless advocate for transsexuals. It would not be an exaggeration to state that if I had not met Lou, I might not have done transition – at least not for some time. He was the only source of positive and reliable information I could locate, he made sure it was available.

Lou knew we had a lot of work to do, to be who we are, to have good medical care, equal rights and – voices that are authentic and heard. When I expressed guilt that I would no longer be a "woman writer" if I transitioned, since women were oppressed and needed voices, he rightfully pointed out that "we need our writers too". Transsexuals and transsexual men in particular need to speak, write and create. Lou was a writer and capable of standing up for what he saw as truth. He was a gay transsexual man, before this was even allowed or recognized. He is also, the person who helped to change that, and now – being gay is no longer an issue if you want to begin transition. Lou was an advocate for all of our rights, over lunch in the Mission near his home, we talked about transsexual rights. He told me, "The gays will get their rights, the women will get theirs, but when will we get ours?"

I've always remembered that. I've tried to do my bit. Before he died, he wanted to know whether or not I would make the "Max" move, and I told him it was in the works for the end of the year. I think we can all draw real inspiration from who he was, a man without pretense and with actual courage – able to draw on his experience to change the world, for us.

**Max Wolf Valerio, San Francisco, CA**

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I know Lou Sullivan better than anybody I never met.

When I first came out as trans in 1991, I had just finished a degree in history. I showed up unannounced one Saturday afternoon at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, and they promptly put me to work organizing the personal papers of a man who had recently died—some guy named Lou Sullivan.

I met Lou when he was a 10-year-old named Shelia, who wrote entries like "Today we played boys, it was fun" in the pages of a pink vinyl diary. I watched him grow into a man over the next thirty years—a man who built organizations, launched newsletters, campaigned for justice, and recovered history.

That was my first intimate look at a trans life other than my own. How could it not influence me? Lou taught me how to do my own work as a community-based scholar and activist. He's still my inspiration, still the standard I measure myself against.

If you'd like to meet Lou the same way I did, that little pink diary is in the History room at the San Francisco Public Library, along with many other records of his life and work.

**Susan Stryker, San Francisco, CA**